

The Voices of Experienced Elementary Teachers: Their Insights about the Profession

By Susan Marston, Victoria Courtney, & Gerald Brunetti

Introduction

Public school teachers have had to contend with challenging work conditions such as highly diverse student populations, deteriorating facilities, inadequate equipment and supplies, large class sizes, lack of respect from the public, changing expectations from administration and parents, and low salaries. One wonders why some teachers have continued in their profession despite these obstacles and what can be learned from them.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the level of career satisfaction of elementary teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years, and to identify what has kept them in the teaching profession. Such information may be useful in enhancing the pre-service education of beginning teachers and the in-service education of experienced teachers.

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Related Research

Life History

This study descended from the research of Michael Huberman (1993), who used life history studies to examine the lives of teachers in the context of their

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own experiences and values. Huberman explored the life cycle of teachers in relationship to Maslow's hierarchy and adult stages of development. He believed that by more clearly defining the different stages of development for teachers, it would be possible for them to increase self-awareness and affect their life decisions constructively. Other researchers have produced works with similar themes, including Ball and Goodson (1985), Goodson (1992), Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1994), Goodson and Hargraves (1996), Brunetti (2001), Muchmore (2001), Stanford (2001), and Williams (2001). The present study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the attitudes and perspectives of experienced teachers.

Job Satisfaction Among Teachers

A good deal of research (e.g., Konanc, 1996; Marso & Pigge, 1997; and Darling-Hammond, 2003) has examined teacher attrition as well as the phenomenon of burnout (Friedman, 1995) during teachers' later years in the profession. However, none of these researchers addressed teachers who remained satisfied and even enthusiastic about their jobs, committed to both their students and their profession. Brunetti's study (2001), using survey and follow-up interviews, found a high level of job satisfaction in a group of high school teachers in Northern California. Marston, Brunetti, and Courtney (2005) examined similarities and differences between Brunetti's original group of high school teachers and the experienced California and Pennsylvania elementary teachers included in the present study. The researchers found that while teachers at the two levels differed in various ways, they were remarkably similar in their high degree of satisfaction with their jobs and the extent to which their devotion to "core professional values" (e.g., satisfaction in working with young people, satisfaction in fulfilling a professional commitment) motivated them to remain in the classroom. The present study explores in more depth similarities and differences between the two groups of experienced elementary teachers.

This research was also informed by the study of Klecker and Loadman (1997) that identified some of the correlates of job satisfaction, including intrinsic rewards (e.g., professional autonomy, interactions with students and colleagues) and extrinsic rewards (e.g., salary, opportunities for advancement). Shann (1998) described teacher job satisfaction as a multifaceted construct that appears to be strongly related to teacher retention and school effectiveness. Interviews and questionnaires from 92 teachers in four urban middle schools were used to assess the importance and satisfaction that they assigned to various aspects of their jobs. They were most satisfied with teacher-pupil relationships, a finding consistent with the research of Gay (1995) and Laden-Billings (1994), who found that effective teachers place significant emphasis on student-teacher relationships. Parent-teacher relationships were the area of least satisfaction and greatest concern among the respondents.

Research on teacher-teacher relationships also informed the present study. Yee (1990) reported that teachers' interactions with colleagues provided their most valued professional stimulation. Other researchers have found that collegial

interaction and support influence the satisfaction and retention of teachers (Popkewitz & Myrdal, 1991; Theobald, 1989).

Kim and Loadman (1994) reported the following seven statistically significant predictors of job satisfaction: positive interactions with students and with colleagues, professional challenges, professional autonomy, tolerable working conditions, decent salary, and opportunities for advancement. Dinham (1994) divided sources of teacher satisfaction and dissatisfaction into the affective domain and school structure/administration. He found that the greatest source of satisfaction was pupil achievement. Sources of dissatisfaction included changes in educational policy and procedures, large class sizes, lack of resources, and poor relationships with superiors.

Teacher satisfaction influences education reform, job performance, teacher persistence, and student performance. Yet studies of teacher satisfaction have shown wide-ranging differences according to demographic factors, professional experience, and position. Even the measurement of satisfaction is problematic in that it is characteristically based on teachers providing a unitary response to a multifaceted, complex issue.

Research Questions

The present study was designed to examine the following research questions:

1. To what extent are experienced elementary teachers satisfied with their work?
2. Among those who are satisfied, what are the principal motivators or sources of satisfaction that underlie their decision to remain in the classroom?

The study also provided the opportunity to explore additional research questions, which probed more deeply into areas of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) among experienced elementary teachers:

3. How do teachers describe and value their relationships with teacher colleagues?
With administrators?
4. How do teachers connect and balance their lives within school and their lives outside of school?

Finally, the study enabled the researchers to examine similarities and differences between Pennsylvania and California teachers in their responses to survey items and interview questions.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This study was carried out in a large school district in Northern California and two medium-size school districts in eastern Pennsylvania. In both settings researchers focused on elementary teachers with 15 or more years of experience in the

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classroom, a somewhat arbitrary cut-off point at which it could be assumed that most teachers had established themselves as classroom practitioners and were not as likely as their less-experienced colleagues to leave the profession. The California schools were selected because they came from the same school district—and from the same broad ethnic and socio-economic environment—as the high schools in Brunetti's (2001) study, thus facilitating within-district comparisons. Pennsylvania schools were selected because they represented a socio-economic make-up somewhat similar to the California group, but were located in a far different part of the country, i.e., the East Coast. Using these two populations would allow the researchers to make stronger claims about the generalizability of similarities among the teachers, while ferreting out differences that might be attributed to geography. Both populations could also be considered convenience groups, since the researchers had ready access to the three school districts.

The teachers taught in 33 different elementary schools that served predominantly working-class and middle-class populations, with socio-economic status ranging from economically depressed to affluent. The teachers ranged in age from under 40 to over 60, with the majority being in the 40-49 age range. There were 7 men and 93 women. Since the teachers volunteered to participate, there was an element of self-selection bias in the study.

In the California district, the data came from 26 elementary schools that served students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade, with enrollments that ranged from 300 to 800 students. The ethnic diversity of the students enrolled in the schools ranged from nearly homogeneous (largely Caucasian or Hispanic) to highly heterogeneous. Overall, the district's student population was 67.8% Caucasian, with significant numbers of Hispanic (15.6%), Asian American (10.7%), and African American (4.7%) students.

The Pennsylvania data came from two middle-sized school districts (approximately 3,400 and 5,500 students) outside a large eastern city, with one school district supporting two elementary schools and the other supporting five elementary schools. The student population in both school districts was predominately Caucasian, with some African American (6%), Asian American (5%), and Hispanic (less than 1%) students. Both school districts served students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade in a suburban area.

Instrumentation

Part 1: Experienced Teacher Survey. The Experienced Teacher Survey (Appendix A) from Brunetti's study (2001) was used. This survey was designed to collect information about teachers' satisfaction and their motivations for remaining in the classroom. The 18 items on motivation were divided into three broad areas: Questions 1-9 were concerned with Professional Satisfaction factors, such as satisfaction in serving society and in seeing students learn and grow; questions 10-15 were related to Practical factors like job security, salary, and benefits; and

questions 16-18 dealt with Social factors, including relationships with parents, colleagues, and administrators. The survey also included three questions designed to assess the overall level of career satisfaction of the teachers.

The survey asked teachers to rate how important each factor was in their decision to continue as a classroom teacher. The scale ranged from 1.0 (not important) to 4.0 (very important). The survey also included a section in which teachers could write additional explanations or comments.

In California, the Experienced Teacher Survey was distributed to the teachers by the principals of cooperating elementary schools. In some cases, the principals collected the surveys and sent them to the researcher; in other cases, the principals asked teachers to send their completed surveys directly to the researcher. Of the approximately 120 surveys that were distributed to elementary teachers, 49 (41%) were returned.

In Pennsylvania, the researcher placed surveys and a letter explaining the research in the mailboxes of teachers in all seven elementary schools. Included in the distribution were specialist teachers (e.g., music teachers, P.E. teachers) and librarians. (Note: Specialist teachers are generally regarded as regular teachers in Pennsylvania. In California, on the other hand, most elementary specialist teachers have been eliminated in recent years. Those remaining are often seen as extra, enrichment teachers and not as regular classroom teachers.) Teachers were asked to return the surveys to the researcher using a stamped, self-addressed envelope that was provided. A total of 80 surveys were distributed; 51 (64%) were completed and returned.

Part 2: Interviews. At the end of the survey, each teacher was asked to include his or her name and telephone number if he or she was willing to be interviewed. In interviewing teachers, the researchers used a protocol of open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The researchers encouraged teachers to elaborate on their responses and used follow-up questions to elicit further reflection and more detailed explanations. The interviews lasted one to three hours each, and the majority of the questions used were identical for both Pennsylvania and California teachers (see Appendix B for the differences between questions).

In California, the researcher made an effort to interview all of the teachers who indicated their willingness, or possible willingness, to be interviewed. Some, however, did not return phone calls. The researcher included most of the questions in the protocol but added new questions concerning teacher preparation. Ultimately, 21 teachers from 19 schools were interviewed. Twelve of the California elementary interviews were transcribed verbatim. The other nine were written into a narrative summary as the researcher listened to the interviewee and the tape. The transcriptions and the narrative summaries served as the primary data source for the interviews. The survey and interview data were collected between October 2001 and January 2002 (except for two late interviews conducted during the spring of 2002).

Among the teachers in Pennsylvania, every teacher was interviewed who

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indicated that she or he was willing or possibly willing to be interviewed, which totaled 30 teachers. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The transcriptions from the interviews comprised the primary data source. The surveys were distributed in January 2001 and interviews were conducted in June 2001.

Data Analysis

Experienced Teacher Surveys. The researchers used t tests to determine the significance of differences in item mean scores between the two groups of elementary teachers.

Interviews. The researchers read, re-read, and coded the transcriptions (or narrative summaries) of the interviews they had conducted as well as those collected by their co-researcher in the other state. In order to further analyze the data, the researchers used a technique called constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This technique involves comparing and contrasting the data, categorizing it to determine the distinctive characteristics of each data set, determining patterns, and designating themes. The two researchers who had conducted the interviews examined their own data and identified tentative themes. All three of the researchers then came together to validate overall themes and patterns. The findings were then grouped according to the research questions the data seemed to address.

Findings

The findings are presented below for each of the research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are included in the analysis. For each question, the researchers report the basis (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, or both) of their findings.

Research Question 1:

To What Extent Are Experienced Elementary Teachers Satisfied with Their Jobs?

Questions on the Experienced Teacher Survey exploring the level of teacher job satisfaction are displayed in Table 1. Among the 100 teachers who returned surveys, most were satisfied with their jobs in teaching, as indicated by a Total mean score of 3.39 on the 4-point scale (See Table 1, Question 3). On Question 1 (“I look forward to coming to work each day”), elementary teachers from California expressed a significantly higher degree of satisfaction than their Pennsylvania counterparts ($p < .05$). Overall, the survey data suggests that these experienced elementary teachers were satisfied with their jobs.

Research Question 2:

Among Those Who Are Satisfied, What Are the Principal Motivators or Sources of Satisfaction That Underlie Their Decision to Remain in the Classroom?

As mentioned previously, the Experienced Teacher Survey includes 18 items that teachers rated as motivators that have induced the teachers to remain in the

Table 1
Comparison of Job Satisfaction among California and Pennsylvania Experienced Teachers

Question	CA (N = 49)	PA (N = 51)	Total (N = 100)	Level of Significance
1. I look forward to coming to work each day.	3.49	3.29	3.36	*
2. If I had it to do over, I would choose the teaching profession again.	3.28	3.38	3.34	
3. I am satisfied with my job.	3.42	3.35	3.39	

* $p < .05$

classroom. This section will focus on the extent to which Professional and Practical factors motivate teachers to remain in the classroom. Social factors will be discussed in detail under Research Question 3.

Sources of Satisfaction

Professional satisfaction factors. The following questions regarding Professional Satisfaction factors were asked in the Experienced Teacher Survey. Table 2 presents the mean scores of the teacher groups on these items.

Table 2
Comparison of California and Pennsylvania Teachers' Motivators for Remaining in the Classroom: Professional Satisfaction Factors

Professional Satisfaction Factors	CA (N = 49)	PA (N = 51)	Total (N = 100)	Level of Significance
1. Satisfaction in fulfilling a professional commitment	3.60	3.67	3.64	
2. Satisfaction in serving society (e.g., "making a difference" by educating future citizens)	3.56	3.65	3.61	
3. Satisfaction in working with young people (including involvement in extracurricular activities)	3.75	3.79	3.77	
4. Satisfaction in being successful at something you enjoy ("born to teach")	3.91	3.73	3.82	*
5. Satisfaction at seeing young people learn and grow	3.88	3.83	3.85	
6. Joy in teaching your subject	3.60	3.10	3.35	***
7. The intellectual challenges involved in teaching	3.46	3.35	3.40	
8. Freedom and flexibility in the classroom	3.61	3.40	3.50	*
9. The opportunity to be creative (e.g., in designing curriculum and lessons)	3.69	3.63	3.66	

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

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Based on the responses, this cluster of Professional Satisfaction factors seemed to represent core values for professional teachers. Elementary teachers from both states identified them as powerful motivators for keeping them in the classroom. It is noteworthy that teachers from both states assigned high ratings (i.e., mean scores of 3.75 and higher) to the following items: satisfaction in working with young people, satisfaction in seeing young people learn and grow, and satisfaction in being successful at something you enjoy. However, California elementary teachers tended to place a higher value ($p < .05$) on being successful at something they enjoy than did their Pennsylvania counterparts.

Throughout the interviews, the teachers from both states emphasized their work with young people as a powerful motivator for keeping them in the profession. For example, a first-grade teacher from Pennsylvania explained, “My greatest satisfaction is working with youngsters and watching them develop and blossom through reading/language arts instruction from non-readers into readers.” A fourth-grade teacher from California commented, “I love the kids! It’s rewarding to see growth from September to June.” A third-grade teacher from California echoed, “Teaching is a wonderful and rewarding career. There is nothing like seeing your students get an idea or understand a concept.” A first-grade California teacher noted, “I love my job and being around young children—for me, that is it; I mean that’s what I want to do.” And a second-grade teacher from Pennsylvania shared that, “The part of it that I like the best is what I do most of the day, and that’s work with the kids. If I could block all the other things out, I would never, ever want to retire from this.”

Their relationships with students are another factor that influenced the teachers’ decisions to remain in the classroom. In responding to the interview question, “In what ways have your relationships with students influenced your decision to stay in teaching?” some teachers described their relationships from the perspective of the students, others from their own perspective, and still others combined the two. However, almost all of the teachers reported that their relationships with students were “very important” and “fundamental to learning.”

Elementary teachers from both Pennsylvania and California discussed the importance of having a balanced professional and personal relationship with students—caring, but not being too close. They perceived themselves as playing the multiple roles of friend, mentor, and parent, depending on the situation. They liked the students and felt liked by the students in return. A number of the teachers from both states reported that mutual respect and trust were keys to their relationships with students. Other teachers emphasized the importance of effective listening, fairness, approachability, kindness, and compassion. They also commented on the value of getting feedback from the students with respect to their teaching.

The elementary teachers often described their classes from the perspective of being a family. They were aware of the importance of modeling appropriate behavior and relationships. The teachers reported that the students respected their authority and viewed them as role models, so they felt obligated to be mindful of

these things as they taught. They also described the way in which different kinds of relationships were influenced by the numbers of students in their classes.

Teachers from both Pennsylvania and California expressed in their interviews the importance and value they placed on hearing about the accomplishments of former students whom they had maintained contact with through the years:

I enjoy teaching and watching the students grow both academically and socially. Then, in years down the road, when a parent comes up to you and tells you that their child who had you in class is now in college or has a good job, it makes you feel good and that all your effort was worth it. Also, sometimes the students come back to visit and fill you in on their lives. [fifth-grade Pennsylvania teacher]

Another teacher noted:

Teaching has given me much self-satisfaction. I have learned so much from my students about life in general. I have also kept in touch with former students throughout the years, and it's exciting to hear how successful they are as adults and know that I may have had a small influence in their lives and education. [second-grade California teacher]

Overall, it is evident in both the quantitative and qualitative data that California and Pennsylvania elementary teachers see the students as the primary reason for remaining in teaching.

There were differences, however, between California and Pennsylvania teachers in the extent to which they valued freedom and flexibility in the classroom (i.e., classroom autonomy; Item 8); clearly this was a more important motivator for California teachers. What might account for this difference? One possible explanation could be the differences between the two states' approaches to mandated curriculum. In Pennsylvania, where the mandates were stricter (at least in 2000/2001), teachers did not have as much freedom and flexibility as their California colleagues and, therefore, perhaps, did not perceive it as a strong motivating factor for staying in the profession.

Another difference between California and Pennsylvania teachers was the rating of Item 6 ("Joy in teaching your subject"; see Table 2 above). Pennsylvania teachers gave this item a rating of 3.10, while the California teachers rated it 3.60, representing a significant difference at $p < .001$. However, it is difficult to determine precisely what caused the group differences on Item 6, because each group was asked slightly different interview questions (see Appendix B).

Teachers in both groups responded to their interview question on subject matter by affirming in no uncertain terms the importance of content or curriculum. As one third-grade teacher from California expressed it: "It's terribly important. I don't think we can do our job unless we are terribly aware of academics." A first-grade teacher from California agreed: "[It's] extremely [important]. That's my job—to educate my students." A Pennsylvania fourth-grade teacher emphasized that it was important to be "prepared . . . and be knowledgeable in your subject matter." Several elementary teachers from each state talked about an integrated approach to

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teaching the curricula. For example, a first-grade teacher from Pennsylvania said, “When we . . . systematically integrate the social studies and science into language arts and everything . . . [these curricula] have particularly lent themselves to just a high interest level with the children and their total involvement with what we are doing.” The integration of subjects seems consistent with the thematic-based approach supported in their respective school districts and/or learned in teacher preparation or in-service programs.

Teachers from both states described the challenges of teaching many subjects, rather than one or two, and the impact of changes in the curriculum. Several elementary teachers alluded to a curriculum their school had adopted—in reading, mathematics, social studies, or science—and discussed its merits. For instance, a fourth-grade Pennsylvania teacher stated, “I really enjoy teaching math. We have this Chicago Program here, and I like it.” A common curriculum that all teachers were expected to follow, however, presented certain problems: “You know, they want to solve society’s ills by a new reading program, a new science program. Every three years we have a new science, a new reading . . . it’s like driving us crazy” (Pennsylvania, second/third-grade teacher).

Practical Satisfaction factors. Table 3 presents the mean scores of the teacher groups on Practical Satisfaction factors (Brunetti, 2001). Significant differences between California and Pennsylvania teachers ($p < .05$) showed up on three of the four items that comprise this factor. Overall, it appears that Pennsylvania teachers placed a higher value on practical considerations like salary, job security, and a family-friendly teaching schedule than their California counterparts. Why might this be true? Possible reasons could include cultural/social differences, political atmosphere, and overall economic differences between the two states’ representative districts. However, more research is needed to determine why this might be the case.

The interview data also supported the conclusion that Pennsylvania teachers were motivated by practical factors to stay in the profession for 15 or more years. One teacher explained, “The most important factor that contributed to my continued employment as a teacher was that I am raising my own children and I have the same

Table 3
Comparison of California and Pennsylvania Teachers on Motivators
for Remaining in the Classroom: Practical Satisfaction Factors

Practical Satisfaction Factors	CA (N = 49)	PA (N = 51)	Total (N = 100)	Level of Significance
12. Job security (tenure)	2.99	3.40	3.21	*
13. Salary and benefits	3.00	3.37	3.19	
14. Enjoyment of school as an institution	3.27	2.90	3.07	*
15. Advantages of a teaching schedule	2.70	3.12	2.94	*

* $p < .05$

schedule as they do.” Another Pennsylvania teacher wrote, “As a working parent there are certainly many benefits to teaching, i.e., similar hours as my own children’s as well as similar holidays.” A third teacher confided: “I taught for four years and then stayed home for nine years with our three sons. I went back to teaching because it fit into the schedule of raising children with holidays and summers off. I found that the longer I was back, the more I really enjoyed it.” Finally, a librarian from Pennsylvania, when asked what influenced her to continue as a classroom teacher, replied:

[T]he situation is that of money primarily. You may be a very good professional, but it is very difficult to make lateral moves. Being a single person, I have to take care of myself. I would have lost tremendously in salary, benefits and things to make lateral moves. And therefore, it just simply was not economically feasible for me to make the jumps.

In summary, teachers from California and Pennsylvania clearly indicated that young people were the primary motivator that kept them in the classroom for 15 or more years. California teachers rated freedom and flexibility higher than Pennsylvania teachers. Overall, Pennsylvania teachers tended to value practical considerations more than their California counterparts.

Research Question 3:

How Do Teachers Describe and Value Their Relationships with Teacher Colleagues? With Administrators?

Social satisfaction factors. Table 4 presents the mean scores of the teacher groups on Social Satisfaction factors (Brunetti, 2001). In the interviews, the experienced teachers were asked separate questions about the importance to their work of their relationships with fellow teachers and administrators. The teachers’ responses to each of these questions are analyzed below, with additional insights provided by data from the Experienced Teacher Survey.

Relationships with Other Teachers

The Experienced Teacher Survey provided insight into this question. Teachers

Table 4
Comparison of California and Pennsylvania Teachers on Motivators for Remaining in the Classroom: Social Satisfaction Factors

Social Satisfaction Factors	CA (N = 49)	PA (N = 51)	Total (N = 100)	Level of Significance
16. Good teacher colleagues (e.g., interesting, supportive, committed to teaching)	3.44	3.35	3.38	
17. A good principal (e.g., able, open, supportive, good manager)	3.47	3.17	3.31	*

*p < .05

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were asked to rate the importance of “good teacher colleagues (e.g., interesting, supportive, committed to teaching)” as a motivator for remaining in teaching. There were no significant differences between the responses of California and Pennsylvania teachers on this item, who rated the item 3.44 and 3.35, respectively. Based on the survey results, relationships with fellow teachers were important to both California and Pennsylvania elementary teachers.

Teacher ratings on this question ranged from “not that important” to “very important.” On one end of the spectrum, some teachers stated that they actually avoided social relationships with colleagues outside of school. On the other end, some teachers described meeting colleagues regularly for coffee, breakfast, or lunch to talk about personal issues, curriculum, school matters, and student behaviors. Those who found relationships with colleagues to be important said that they provided and received professional support from them, e.g., in goal-setting, sharing of materials, and designing curriculum. The teachers reported that they shared a common concern for the well-being of the students and school. Several teachers said that they viewed all personnel in the school as family, valuing the contributions of the custodian, secretaries, and administrators, as well as those of their teacher colleagues.

Both the California and Pennsylvania teachers reported being more involved with their colleagues early in their careers and becoming less involved socially with their colleagues when they had young children of their own at home. Professionally, they said, “Teachers are more isolated now because there is more business to be done.” They also reported that they tried to avoid conflict, which “sucks the energy out of you.”

Relationships with Administrators

In the Experienced Teacher Survey, teachers were asked the extent to which a good principal (e.g., able, open, supportive, good manager) affected their decision to continue working as a classroom teacher. California elementary teachers gave this item a mean rating of 3.47 while Pennsylvania teachers rated it 3.17. The difference was significant at $p < .05$. In other words, having a good principal tended to be more important to California teachers than to Pennsylvania teachers with respect to their decision to stay in teaching.

The question asked in the interviews was broader than the survey item: “How would you describe your relationship with administrators, and how has this affected your work as a teacher?” Responses from both groups of elementary teachers fell into the following three categories: issues with administrators, perceived roles of administrators, and desired roles of administrators. Most teachers said that they got along well with some of their administrators and not well with others. The teachers often reported that they would not want to be an administrator: “We are always great critics, but I would never want to walk in their shoes.” “Administrators are too far removed from the kids.” “It’s a very challenging job and it takes a lot of time to meet the multiple demands—longer hours than [classroom] teachers and it’s impossible

to please everybody.” Most teachers concluded with a statement such as, “I don’t always agree with my administrator, but I must rise above that and stay professional so that we can work together.”

Perceived issues with administrators included student discipline (often described as “inconsistent”), lack of accountability, and low visibility in the classroom. Teachers’ perceptions of proper roles for administrators included providing leadership; setting the tone/climate of the school; and providing support for teachers in the form of positive feedback, good discipline, resources, professional growth opportunities, and competent staff. Proper roles for administrators also included participating in the classroom, getting rid of incompetent teachers, and serving as a buffer between the teachers, parents, and community.

Several elementary teachers described feeling intimidated early in their careers by their administrators but said that they developed trust over time. Teachers wanted two-way communication with their administrators and wanted to have their opinions valued. Some teachers described administrators as the “key to the retention of new teachers.”

In summary, social factors were another source of satisfaction that motivated teachers to remain in the classroom. Both groups of teachers valued relationships with colleagues. While having a good principal seemed to be more important to California than to Pennsylvania teachers in the survey responses, the interviews showed many similarities between the two groups.

Research Question 4:

How Do Teachers Connect and Balance Their Lives within School and Their Lives outside of School?

Interviews comprised the data source for this research question. Several themes emerged across the groups of teachers. First, elementary teachers discussed how time-consuming teaching was in their lives. A California fifth-grade teacher remarked: “There is not a night that goes by that I don’t take work home. There have been times, approximately once a month, where I stay up until about 2:00 in the morning doing nothing but correcting and getting caught up and having my Pepsi so I can keep going.”

Not only did teachers report how time-consuming the work could be, but teachers also admitted how hard teaching could be on family life. This was a prominent theme in the data. For example, a second-grade Pennsylvania teacher lamented:

My life outside of school right now is kind of non-existent because of what I’m doing in school. Ask my daughter and my husband. Yeah, it’s very time-consuming at different times of the year. It’s not always that time-consuming, but it’s always there. My husband said to me the other day, “When am I going to get you back?”

A fourth-grade Pennsylvania teacher added: “I know my husband has felt the pressure of a lot of time outside of my day being spent . . . working.” A second-grade California teacher remembered: “When I was teaching full time . . . [my own kids]

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came in second all the time. My kids did have resentments when they were sick and I went to school and they ended up last. My husband also.”

Even though teachers reported that teaching eroded the time they could spend with their families, there were teachers in both groups that spoke about integrating teaching with their life and family. A Pennsylvania reading specialist explained:

Well, when you're a teacher, you're a teacher 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's that kind of job. And if you don't love it, it's not the profession for you. Because whatever it is, you're going to the supermarket and you're buying marshmallows because you're reading [about] some "crunchy-munchy" cookies and they have marshmallows and you're using that as a motivation. Or you go to the dollar store to get prizes 'cause they're going to finish their little sticker charts. It's constant! It's constant! And your whole family gets involved. You know your kids, my girls, they cut out things for you and make letters and they come in and they help you decorate your classroom and help you clean up at the end of the year. Your husband carries boxes of stuff in for you. That's just the way it is. It's like a whole family profession.

A California first-grade teacher observed, "My life really does revolve around the school. Because of my husband [being a teacher, too], if it wasn't my school, it was his school." Still other teachers saw the integration of life inside and outside of school through their participation in teaching Sunday school or being a Brownie or Girl Scout leader. A fifth-grade California teacher stated: "You end up doing these things because that is part of your profession. You deal well with children."

Two Pennsylvania elementary music teachers reflected upon how everything they did in life was music. One teacher commented: "Well, my life is mostly music. Outside of school I'm singing, and I'm playing, and I'm listening to music. I'm writing materials. So, pretty much everything that I do is music." Another music teacher explained:

I also sing in a barbershop chorus, a barbershop quartet, and my experiences going to workshops as a music educator, being involved in the field on a constant basis, has certainly helped my outside interest in music. It's allowed me to be more educated in my own field because I'm getting more training all the time for vocal techniques and then that turns into my adult fun.¹

Some of the elementary teachers commented on how they were constantly thinking about connecting their lives outside of school to the classroom. As a Pennsylvania librarian reported: "I like learning. I enjoy investigating new things. I enjoy travel and taking pictures. And I pick up stories and folktales . . . and bring that [information] in to show children."

Even though some teachers expressed how connected their teaching and their outside lives were, some Pennsylvania teachers emphasized the importance of separate lives and balancing time inside and outside the classroom. A Pennsylvania reading specialist discussed how hard it was to maintain a balance in her life: "I try to separate my work from my personal life. Sometimes that's hard to do. It's hard not

to bring things home sometimes, especially if you've had a bad day. But I really do try to separate it." A Pennsylvania special education teacher reported her experiences:

I made a mistake in the beginning of teaching that I used to give out my home phone number . . . and I had a parent once call me [while] my son was in the bathtub, and I kept saying, "I'll be glad to call you back, but my son . . . I can't leave him alone. He's in the bathtub, I've got to get back to him." She wouldn't let me off the phone. And I learned my lesson. And the next year I changed my phone number and didn't give it out any more.

She concluded, "I like that separate life. I think that's the best thing, to really keep the school at school."

Another theme from the data reflects how parenthood affects teachers and their teaching. Teachers in both groups reported being more compassionate and sensitive to students after having their own children. A second-grade Pennsylvania teacher commented, "After having children of my own, I had more of an understanding of where the children and their parents were coming from." A California special education teacher expressed how motherhood had influenced her life as a teacher:

When I first started teaching, I hadn't had any children; and having children and being a teacher are certainly complementary. I think I had no appreciation, prior to having children, of the sensitivity that parents have for their own children's needs, and how much a part of them their child's development is, and how vulnerable they are through their children. Having had my own children, I saw the parents' [point of view]—especially going into special education after that and dealing with parents who had come to grips with the difficulty that their children are going to have life-long. . . . So I would say that having had children certainly helped me grow as a teacher.

In summary, several themes emanated from the interview data: how time-consuming teaching was in the teachers' lives; how hard teaching could be on their families; the diversity in the degree of integration teachers found between their professional and personal lives; and the importance of life experiences, such as parenthood, in how life outside of school has influenced their work in the classroom.

Conclusions

This study examined career satisfaction among a group of elementary teachers in California and Pennsylvania who had been teaching for 15 or more years; the study explored factors that motivated these teachers to continue as classroom practitioners. Quantitative data from the Experienced Teacher Survey and qualitative data from individual interviews were collected from a sample of teachers from each state. Research questions focused on the nature and extent of job satisfaction, teacher relationships with colleagues and administrators, and perceived balance between their personal and professional lives.

California and Pennsylvania teachers indicated that core professional values, such as satisfaction in working with young people and satisfaction in fulfilling a

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professional commitment, were powerful motivators for keeping them in the classroom. Pennsylvania teachers valued practical concerns such as job security, salary, and benefits more than their California counterparts. Social factors, such as relationships with colleagues and administrators, were another source of satisfaction for teachers in both groups. California teachers valued having a good principal more than their Pennsylvania counterparts. In addition, both groups expressed how time-consuming and challenging the profession was for them and their families, and how life experiences, such as parenthood, influenced their work in the classroom.

Future Research

If we want to make education better for future students and teachers, we must continue to examine the lives of experienced teachers from their own perspectives and in the context of their own experiences and values. By listening to the voices of experienced teachers—their motivations for staying in the profession as well as their attitudes towards selected issues and values that define their practice—we, as teacher educators, can more realistically prepare new teachers. Making all teachers aware of satisfaction factors (e.g., the Professional, Practical, and Social factors found in the Experienced Teacher Survey) can help to better prepare candidates for the rewards and the challenges ahead in the teaching profession. Additionally, the outcomes of the study could be of value to administrators seeking to retain good experienced teachers. For instance, it would seem very useful for administrators to understand the importance to teachers of having principals who are able, open, and supportive, and are good managers.

More research is needed to create a broader picture of how experienced elementary teachers are similar and different in the attitudes and values that define their practice. Extending this study to elementary teachers in other states, as well as to elementary teachers in urban school districts, where issues of race, ethnicity, and class are especially important, would provide a starting point for continuing research in this area. It would also be illuminating to see how middle-school teachers respond to the same questions and issues, as well as how teacher collaboration might also affect satisfaction. In addition, further analysis should be carried out on existing interview data to understand responses to the following questions: What are the principal things teachers are trying to accomplish? What do they see as their most important responsibilities? What advice would experienced teachers offer beginning teachers entering the classroom today?

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Note

¹ As noted in Marston, Brunetti, and Courtney (2005), subject specialists, such as music and P.E. teachers, resembled high school teachers, particularly in the way they responded to the interview question about their subject.

Appendix A:

Experienced Teacher Survey (includes results)

Gender: (__M or __F) Age: __under 40 __40–49 __50–59 __over 60
 Ethnic group (optional): _____ School: _____
 What subject(s) do you teach? _____
 What grades do you teach? _____
 How many years have you been at your present school? _____
 Have you taught in other schools? ____Yes ____No
 If Yes, where? City _____ State _____ Grade Level _____ Number of Years ____
 How many years total have you been teaching? _____
 Do you hope to still be teaching in 5 years? ____Yes ____No ____Do not know
 If No, why not? _____
 When you stop working, what do you plan to do? _____
 Do you plan to continue working with children or young people in some capacity?
 ____Yes ____No ____Do not know
 If Yes, please describe: _____

To what extent has your decision to continue working as a classroom teacher been influenced by the following factors, some intrinsic to your work, others extrinsic? For each factor, circle the number indicating how important it is for you.

	Not Important	Of Little Import	Somewhat Important	Very Important	CASurvey (N = 49) Mean	PASurvey (N = 49) Mean
1. Satisfaction in fulfilling a professional commitment.	1	2	3	4	3.60	3.67
2. Satisfaction in serving society (e.g., "making a difference" by educating future citizens).	1	2	3	4	3.56	3.65
3. Satisfaction in working with young people (including involvement in extracurricular activities).	1	2	3	4	3.75	3.79
4. Satisfaction in being successful at something you enjoy ("born to teach").	1	2	3	4	3.91	3.73
5. Satisfaction at seeing young people learn and grow.	1	2	3	4	3.88	3.83
6. Joy in teaching your subject.	1	2	3	4	3.60	3.10
7. The intellectual challenges involved in teaching.	1	2	3	4	3.46	3.35

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8. Freedom and flexibility in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	3.61	3.40
9. The opportunity to be creative (e.g., in designing curriculum and lessons).	1	2	3	4	3.69	3.63
10. Nowhere else to go (after many years in teaching).	1	2	3	4	1.74	1.87
11. The holidays: summer vacation, Christmas and spring breaks, etc.	1	2	3	4	2.96	3.13
12. Job security (tenure).	1	2	3	4	2.99	3.40
13. Salary and benefits.	1	2	3	4	3.00	3.37
14. Enjoyment of school as an institution.	1	2	3	4	3.27	2.90
15. Advantages of a teaching schedule for someone raising a family.	1	2	3	4	2.70	3.12
16. Good teacher-colleagues (e.g., interesting, supportive, committed to teaching).	1	2	3	4	3.44	3.35
17. A good principal (e.g., able, open, supportive, good manager).	1	2	3	4	3.47	3.17
18. Supportive parents, community.	1	2	3	4	3.54	3.27
19. Overall satisfaction with career.	1	2	3	4	3.80	3.71

For each statement below, please circle the pertinent number.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	CASurvey (N = 49) Mean	PASurvey (N = 49) Mean
1. I look forward to coming to work each day.	1	2	3	4	3.49	3.29
2. If I had it to do over I would choose the teaching profession again.	1	2	3	4	3.28	3.38
3. I am satisfied with my job.	1	2	3	4	3.35	3.42
4. Students' motivation and performance depend on their home environment; a teacher cannot do much to overcome this.	1	2	3	4	2.20	2.27
5. With hard work, I can get through to even the most difficult students.	1	2	3	4	3.10	2.85

If you have further explanations or comments, please write them below or on a separate piece of paper.

I would like to conduct individual interviews with some of you to explore further your

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experiences in teaching and your motivations for remaining in the high school classroom. I anticipate that each interview, scheduled at your convenience, will run approximately 1 to 1-and-a-half hours.

Would you be willing to be interviewed? ___Yes ___No ___Possibly. ___Please call me.
If you answered Yes or Possibly, please include your name and telephone number so that I can call you.

Name _____ Phone Number _____

Thank you for your time and willingness to complete this study. Please return it in the enclosed self-addressed envelope by _____

Appendix B

Experienced Teacher Survey Interview Protocol

Please tell me a little about your career as a teacher. You may want to mention how you got interested in teaching, where and when you began, what schools you've taught at; what subjects, kinds of students, highlights of your career, etc.

As you know, in this study I am principally interested in exploring with teachers their motivation for remaining in the classroom. Can you tell me what has influenced your decision to continue as a classroom teacher for _____ years?

Have there been times, during your years as a teacher, when you considered leaving the classroom? What were your thoughts at the time and what made you change your mind?

What are the principal things you are trying to accomplish as a teacher?

What do you see as your most important responsibilities as a teacher?

Did you have any role models or mentors that influenced your becoming a teacher or the way you work as a teacher?

How important is your subject matter to your work as a teacher? Is it, for instance, your passion for teaching a variety of subjects that energizes your teaching and continues to motivate you? Or is the subject matter primarily a vehicle for working with young people in a school setting?

How would you describe your relationship with students, and how important is this relationship to you?

How about your relationships with fellow teachers? Are these relationships important to your work as a teacher?

And what about administrators? How would you describe your relationship with administrators and how has this affected your work as a teacher?

Finally, how important has your relationship with parents and the broader community been to your work as a teacher?

How has your life outside school influenced and been influenced by your work as a teacher?

In looking back at your career, how have you changed since your earliest years in the classroom?

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What have been your most rewarding experiences as a teacher? And conversely, what experiences have been the most depressing or discouraging?

Do you consider teaching a true profession?

[If so] Why? What would make it a stronger profession?

[If not] What would make it a profession?

Do you think you can teach the art of teaching? Explain.

How has the standards/accountability movement affected your work in the classroom?

What advice might you give to new teachers entering the profession?

Are there any other comments or observations you would like to make about your work as a teacher?

For California elementary teachers, the researcher included most of the questions in the protocol.

However, the following questions were not asked:

- (1) What are the principal things you are trying to accomplish as a teacher?
- (2) What do you see as your most important responsibilities as a teacher?
- (3) Do you think you can teach the art of teaching? Explain.
- (4) How has the standards/accountability movement affected your work in the classroom?

Also, California elementary teachers were asked only the first part of the question: i.e., "How important is your subject matter to your work as a teacher?" In some cases they were asked instead, "How important is curriculum to your work as a teacher?"

Finally, only California elementary teachers were asked the following questions:

- (1) How have you been supported in the teaching profession?
- (2) In what other ways do you wish you had been supported, both during your teacher preparation and on the job?
- (3) What can we do to provide more effective pre-service teacher preparation?

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